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imagery analysis report

Soviet Naval Aviation Flight Training Involving Merchant Ships (S)

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SOVIET NAVAL AVIATION FLIGHT TRAINING INVOLVING MERCHANT SHIPS (S)

INTRODUCTION

1. Activity at three Soviet Naval Aviation (SNA) installations, one naval base, and one port facility (Figure 1) indicates that the Soviets were evaluating helicopter and vertical take-off and landing (VTOL) aircraft operations from merchant ships from August through November 1983. The SNA currently operates helicopters from naval-associated transports, but this activity may be the first evidence of an effort to develop a similar capability for FORGERS. Merchant ships are not currently associated with SNA operations, and the successful development of a merchant ship air capability would greatly augment the ability to deploy air forces in support of naval operations. This report contains one map and five annotated photographs. (S/WN)

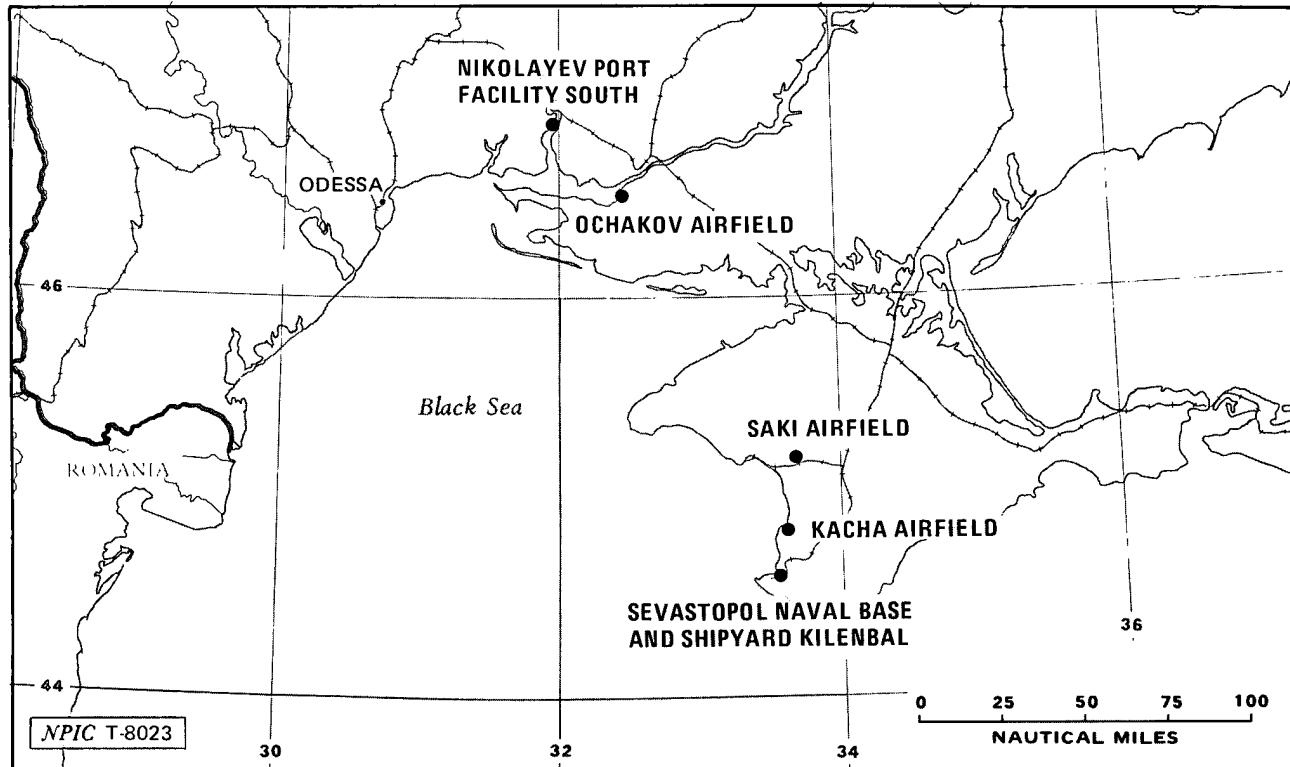


FIGURE 1. SOVIET AVIATION-/MERCHANT SHIP-ASSOCIATED INSTALLATIONS

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DESCRIPTION

2. Outlines simulating the forward deck of a probable merchant ship were painted around two VTOL pads at Saki Airfield [REDACTED], the SNA FORGER training facility, [REDACTED]. The bows of the outlines, parallel to the runway, pointed in opposite directions, probably to simulate various wind conditions over the pads during VTOL operations. In addition, an 18- by 24-meter rectangle, centered on the landing circles, was painted on the pads. (S/WN)

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3. A similar 18-by 24-meter VTOL pad, raised slightly off the deck, was constructed amidships on a Skulptor Konenkov-Class Roll-On/Roll-Off (RO/RO) Ship at Sevastopol Naval Base and Shipyard Kilenbal [REDACTED]. Also, a 10-meter helicopter landing spot, similar to those seen on Soviet naval vessels, was painted forward of the pad. Additional markings, applied to the VTOL pad and deck [REDACTED] consisted of a landing circle centered on the VTOL pad, pad edge markers, a centerline connecting the VTOL pad and the helicopter landing spot, and six additional lines radiating at 45-degree angles from the center of the VTOL pad. Similar radii are on VTOL pads at Saki. The two forward radii, as well as the two perpendicular to the centerline, extended to the deck edge. (S/WN)

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4. This vessel departed Sevastopol [REDACTED]. On the latter date, it was dead-in-the-water, approximately 18 kilometers (km) north of Sevastopol and 8 km southwest of Kacha Airfield [REDACTED] a Black Sea Fleet Air Force helicopter base (Figure 4). Either a dark-toned net or probable blast mark was observed on the VTOL pad. If the latter, it is likely that FORGER flight operations probably had been conducted. Similar blast marks have been associated with FORGER VTOL operations. The ship returned to Sevastopol [REDACTED] and a probable canvas cover was subsequently placed over the port half of the VTOL pad. The canvas covering could have been an attempt to conceal a blast mark and hence the fact that FORGER flight operations had occurred. A net was also rigged on the deck over the helicopter landing spot. Nets are used to prevent helicopter landing gear from sliding while parked on the deck. (S/WN)

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5. An outline of a Skulptor Konenkov-Class RO/RO ship was observed at Ochakov Airfield [REDACTED] the SNA helicopter training center, [REDACTED]. This outline was virtually identical in size to the modified Skulptor Konenkov at Sevastopol and simulated both the VTOL pad and the helicopter landing spot. Ground scarring indicated that only the helicopter landing spot had been used. (S/WN)

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6. The shipboard portion of this program may have ended [REDACTED] when a Skulptor Konenkov-Class RO/RO ship was observed at the central quay of Nikolayev Port Facility South [REDACTED] the major Soviet arms export facility. A possible centerline showed through the painted deck of this ship, an indication that the vessel may have been the previously mentioned modified Skulptor Konenkov (Figure 6). The Skulptor Konenkov has not been observed with modifications since the ship was at Sevastopol Naval Base and Shipyard Kilenbal [REDACTED] (S/WN)

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IMAGERY ANALYST'S COMMENTS

7. These activities represent an attempt by the Soviets to examine the feasibility of conducting both VTOL and helicopter operations from merchant ships. Two to four FORGERs could be carried on the deck of a Skulptor Konenkov RO/RO without hampering operations from the VTOL pad. Modified RO/ROs could be used as ferries to transport aircraft to crisis areas as was done by the British during the Falkland Islands conflict. FORGERs launched from modified merchant ships could also be used to support amphibious operations. In the past, RO/ROs have been used in other functions to support amphibious exercises but have not been directly involved in SNA operations. (S/WN)

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